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SUBJECT: WATER AND SANITATION ISSUES IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

REF: 06 STATE 128229

¶11. (U) Summary. Per reftel, Embassy conducted a review of host country needs and identified opportunities to strengthen U.S. engagement on water and sanitation programs in the Dominican Republic. Access to potable water, especially in rural areas, better sewage infrastructure and treatment facilities, and protecting the sources of fresh water supplies from contamination, chemical pollution, and salinization are the key areas that need to be addressed in the Dominican Republic. End Summary.

Access to potable water

¶12. (SBU) According to the Dominican government's 2006 report on water statistics, 91 percent of the urban population and only 64 percent of the rural population have access to potable water. According to Areli Sebaya, spokesperson for the Dominican National Institute for Potable Water (INAPA), most of the country's northern sector lacks a permanent water supply, and those that have one suffer from outdated technology.

¶13. (U) For the past eight months, more than 60 communities from the provinces of Monte Cristi, Valverde, Santiago and Santiago Rodriguez have suffered from a water shortage. In early November, several communities in Monte Cristi blocked the roadway that connects the province to Santiago with tree trunks and burning tires in demand of potable tap water. According to press reports, violent confrontations took place among community participants and members of the Dominican police and military.

¶14. (U) The Dominican government is working to improve the potable water availability in the country. In November 2006, President Fernandez inaugurated two water treatment facilities, constructed by Biwater, in San Cristobal (near Santo Domingo) and in San Francisco de Macoris (a northeastern province). According to Biwater, the San Cristobal water treatment plant supplies water to approximately 600,000 people and meets World Health Organization (WHO) standards using conventional treatment processes together with chemical and chlorine additives. The project included the design and construction of a one cubic-meter-per-second (cumec) water treatment plant, three booster pumping stations with standby power facilities, three new regional storage reservoirs, 37 kilometers of transmission pipeline, and the training of plant personnel for twelve months. The Mata Larga Water Treatment Plant at San Francisco de Macoris in the northeast of the country includes a one cumec water treatment plant, three pumping stations, two storage reservoirs, 30 kilometers of raw water pipeline, and 40 kilometers of treated water distribution

pipeline. The new plant provides potable water to more than 300,000 people and meets World Health Organization (WHO) standards using conventional treatment processes together with chemical and chlorine doses.

¶5. (U) INAPA's Sebaya also claims that the Dominican Republic is seeking international finance to construct a network of 74 aqueducts by the end of 2008. According to Sebaya, this network should provide drinking water to nearly all Dominicans in the country.

¶6. (SBU) Unfortunately, the majority of water pipes in the urban areas are old and corroded resulting in unhealthy tap water. Most tourism books inform their readers to drink only bottled water and to not drink the tap water regardless of where there are located. The Embassy's medical officer conducted a water survey of embassy residences located at twelve separate districts in Santo Domingo and found that the water was not suitable for consumption.

¶7. (U) The Dominican medical community provides clear evidence that the lack of access to clean potable water contributes to high infant mortality rates. The Dominican Republic suffers an infant mortality rate of 31 per 1000 (Demographic and Health survey 2002). The third leading cause for infant deaths in the country is diarrhea, which is normally caused by drinking contaminated water. According to health officials, diarrhea is the leading cause for infant deaths in Dominican rural areas.

Sewage system and treatment facilities

¶8. (U) The sewage system in the Dominican Republic covers 70

percent of the urban areas and only 30 percent of the rural areas, according to government statistics. Sewage treatment, on the other hand, is nearly non-existent in the rural areas and extremely low in urban areas. According to local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), sewage and bio-medical waste are dumped into the rivers and oceans, which have had a devastating affect on the human health, coral reefs and its ecosystem, as well as the local environment.

Aquifers

¶9. (SBU) According to the USAID-contracted International Resources Group (IRG), the Dominican Republic is facing a water crisis, especially in the eastern half of the island with the dynamic expansion of tourist resorts and golf courses. From Santo Domingo to the eastern shores of Punta Cana, urban and hotel development is potentially outpacing the water supply. A new aqueduct is being built that will stretch over 50 miles to pump water into new hotel developments and the local communities in this region. Unfortunately, many critical fresh water aquifers in this region have already been damaged by the increased water usage for urban areas, hotel occupants, golf courses, and mass irrigation of sugarcane and other crops. IRG, who works closely with the Ministry of Environment, asserts that if the government does not remedy this situation in the near future, the damage to these aquifers could be irreversible and would force the Dominican Republic to build desalinization plants to provide the growing demand for fresh water.

¶10. (SBU) IRG and other environmental groups agree that the government needs to pressure the resort industry to lower its water usage per occupant; however, putting pressure on an industry that is providing around 12 percent of the country's GDP is very difficult. In addition, more efficient irrigation systems for the agricultural sector will have to be developed and used because the sector currently uses 81.5 percent of the total water annually consumed and contributes

only 5.1 percent to the country's GDP.

Opportunities for U.S. engagement

¶11. (U) The United States is already addressing some of the Dominican Republic's water concerns through USAID programs and the Peace Corps, although funds for this purpose are very limited. Part of the funds that IRG receives from USAID provides technical assistance to the Secretariat of the Environment and Natural Resources to improve water use policies and water quality. In addition, USAID has integrated water, sanitation, and hygiene elements into their community-based health programs. Under the Healthy Environment program, the Peace Corps provides assistance in the development of small-scale gravity-fed aqueducts to rural communities. In the last 15 years, over 125 aqueducts have been built at roughly USD 10 thousand per aqueduct. Funding for these aqueducts comes from USAID small project funds, the Canadian government, NGOs, and faith based organizations.

¶12. (U) MILGROUP, though its U.S. Southern Command (US SOUTHCOM) has in the past been involved with the construction of wells. In 2006, SOUTHCOM's New Horizons, exercise focused primarily on constructing medical clinics.

¶13. (U) Foreign donors who are directly engaged in water and sanitation programs in the Dominican Republic include IDB, Japan, Germany, and Brazil. A variety of NGOs are also involved in water and sanitation programs, especially in rural and marginal rural areas where the Dominican government lacks the necessary resources. Private sector firms, such as Procter and Gamble (P&G), are contributing funds and resources to the Dominican water problem. P&G's Director of Children's Safe Drinking Water Program has linked up with Population Services International (PSI) to provide safe drinking water in the Dominican Republic. Their product, PUR (purifier of water), was developed in collaboration with the Center for Disease Control. PUR changes heavily contaminated brown water into clear drinking water. PUR destroys pathogens, parasites, heavy metals, and other impurities. It has reduced the number of diarrhea deaths in other countries tremendously. PUR cannot remove fluoride, nitrates, or sodium chloride (i.e., cannot be used for desalination). P&G is working with PSI to distribute PUR in the Dominican Republic.

¶14. (SBU) Opportunities to provide access to potable water are best located at the local level. Communities, which have

received assistance, have created water committees that are involved in the daily water distribution activities as well as collecting fees for the aqueduct's operations and providing future plans to maintain access to potable water. These committees are the focal points for U.S. assistance. For larger areas as well as urban areas, the main government institution is INAPA. The principal concern with providing assistance to INAPA is its inefficient management and lack of targeted results. Thus, U.S. engagement should focus its efforts on supporting municipalities and community-based organizations that are highly committed to achieving concrete results and managing their funds in a cost-effective manner.

HERTELL